

## The Wonders in Queen's Palace

Inside Queen's Vintage Palace, fur coats, sequenced skirts, and patterned dresses fill the walls of a short narrow walkway that leads to the owner, Queen India in her olive green head wrap. Jars of incents and home remedies fill the wooden bookshelf, a brown antique chest displays the chic sunglasses and jewelry, and tables covered in fabric hold hats, leather purses, and flashy shoes. The boutique on Amsterdam Ave. between 142<sup>nd</sup> St. and 143<sup>rd</sup> St. invites customers in as reggae music flows through the store to the sidewalk out front.

Four years ago Queen opened her first shop after 16 years of street vending. She would travel in her car to cities like Chicago, New York, and Boston exhibiting a similar variety of merchandise as in her store. Queen said, "customers were so fascinated by the display of the table and the props shown" she wanted a bigger space to work with.

**Queen's Vintage Palace is more than just a place to shop. It is a place to talk about life, learn about history, make a friend, and be part of a community. Queen said, "treat people the way you want to be treated and your life will change forever." She has a positive attitude that she applies to everything she does. Once filled with local shops, Queen's Vintage Palace is one of the few boutiques left in the area.**

Queen's merchandise represents items from several decades. She has chunky, bedazzled pins and feathered hats from the 40's. Red and black leather gloves from the 50's. Vibrant patterned dresses from the 60's, and brown-tinted sun glasses from the 70's. Queen has collected a lot of the merchandise herself but a fair amount is donated from people she has met over the years. She spoke on where her merchandise comes from , "blessing come in and blessings go out every day it's amazing" Queen takes pride in the quality of her merchandise as well as her

customer's experience. She said, "quality matters, cheap and cheesy doesn't cut it, what you put in reflects what comes out." The quality of merchandise and customer service in a store ultimately defines the store's reputation.

Each day customers, new and old walk into the Vintage Palace. A dog walker passed her opened door and waved in to Queen, "give the trio kisses for me today!" she said back. A lady in a headress walked through the door, Queen automatically approached her, "Hi Momi! How are you doing today? Are you looking for anything specific? All jewelry is three for twenty dollars, after that seven pieces of anything are each ten." Claire Bell, a regular customer walked into the Vintage Palace looking for accessories to match a long, silver gown. Queen outfitted her with chunky necklaces, feathered hats and silk gloves until she found the perfect ones. Claire laughed, "every time I come in here you make me feel like a princess playing dress up."

Amsterdam Avenue and the surrounding area are filled with new restaurants, chain stores, and corporate businesses. The renovations and increase in large businesses in the neighborhood have shut down the local shops taking away from the community. Queen explained it has created a disconnect, "you don't know the waiter at the weekly restaurant, or the pizza delivery guy, it's not just your world anymore." Queen's pride in community stems from her decades of living in Harlem. Every year she coordinates a fundraiser for the annual Mother's Day parade. She has a donation section in her store that has pictures of past years with t-shirts, prizes, and bands. The changes in the area have increased Queen's determination to keep a sense of community through the Vintage Palace. She said, "the rent, the crap, it all hurts me too, but it's not going to bring me down, stay positive always."

Minutes before the store closed for the night, a Columbia student, 23-year-old David Spear walked in with a guitar on his back. He apologizes to Queen, "sorry I missed last weeks

learning session but I wanted to come and say hi!” He and his friends attend Queen’s weekly learning session on spirit and soul right in her store. She laughed, “oh baby, just remember your spirit is your best friend, it never hurts you or lies!” Queen advises these students on how to focus on the good in the world when life has become programmed. She teaches them the significance of music and lyrics from decades ago. Soon, Ohio Players started blasting throughout the store. “Listen to the lyrics,” she said, “they are literally telling us what is happening in our lives right now, 30 years ago!”

As David walked out of the store Queen shouted, “and smile all day long all day strong baby, it’s a powerful act.”